5F Andrew M. Guest, University of Portland
“‘You Better Feel Some Love’: Social and Psychological Perspectives on Fandom Where (Women’s) Professional Soccer Matters”

By the metric of average home attendance, the Portland Thorns of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) are the most popular women’s professional sports team in the world. This presentation draws on a mixed-methods case study of the Thorns, with an intentional focus on the fans and supporters culture rather than management and players, to analyze ways the Thorns relative success can inform women’s sports advocates and sport studies scholars. Drawing on a combination of historical, socio-cultural, and psychological perspectives, the case study demonstrates ways that the particular fan culture in Portland provides foundations for a type of agentic, inclusive, and values-based fandom that fits well with women’s soccer in the United States. Combined with a professional environment, high-level soccer, and intentional support for women’s opportunities, this type of Thorns fandom provides an example of how hybrid and counter-hegemonic sport cultures can gain popular appeal and inform understandings of sports fandom more broadly.

5F Christopher Henderson, University of Iowa
“Two Balls Is Too Many: Stadium Performance, Gender, and Queerness Among Portland’s Rose City Riveters Supporters Club”

Portland, Oregon’s Rose City Riveters are the largest independent organized supporters group for a women’s soccer team in the world. They support Portland Thorns with an organized, loud and organic performance of songs and displays that envelopes the entire stadium. With their largely female and queer membership and leadership, they challenge both the hyper-masculinity of organized fan support in soccer and heteronormative constructs of idealized female fans as perpetuated by the National Women’s Soccer League. In order to explore the potential liberative and limiting aspects of fan culture, this ethnographic study argues that the Riveters counter-hegemonic activity is based in a convergence of the organized active supporters culture and performance of soccer, the unapologetically queer assertions of the Riveters stadium performance from their marginalized subject positions as women and queers, and the decision made by the Riveters to work within the confines of the institutions of American soccer to assert their agency as fans.

5F Eileen Narcotta-Welp, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
“Going Solo: The Specter of the 1999ers, Hope Solo, and the Practice of Freedom”

Although U.S. goalkeeper, Hope Solo, had guided the women’s national soccer team to the semi-finals of the 2007 Women’s World Cup, head coach Greg Ryan, benched Solo in favor of 1999 World Cup winning goalkeeper, Briana Scurry. The U.S. lost, 4 – 0, the worst loss ever in World Cup play. The loss did not capture news headlines; rather, Hope Solo’s post-game comments about Ryan’s decision to bench her went viral. I contend that Solo’s outburst, as a ‘practice of freedom,’ was a pivotal shifting point in the historical narrative of the U.S. women’s national soccer team. Haunted by the specter of the 1999ers, Solo’s action was an act of ‘truth-telling’ that confronted an oppressive team culture of female containment. In a 30-second sound bite, Solo altered the discourse of power on the team and in the media creating space for new conceptions of the female athlete to be recognized.
Expectations of women’s lower competence to men inform divisions of labor and authority in sport organizations. While recent research has focused on overt challenge to gendered expectations, few studies examine how organizational gender relations change without direct acknowledgment of gender and inequality. I rely on participant observation and interview data collected with the Momentum, one U.S. women’s professional soccer team, to examine how practices of paternalistic oversight shifted to allow greater autonomy for women. Unexpectedly low home game attendance initiated group sensemaking around the effectiveness of marketing practices. One group, comprised primarily of women, embraced grassroots marketing, while a second group, comprised entirely of men, felt this strategy was ineffective. Sensemaking took place in context of a male dominance that gave men the ability to marginalize women’s perspectives despite women’s positional authority. Change occurred when several men left what they felt to be a struggling organization, with the altered gender composition of staff enabling women’s greater control over their work. I discuss the implications of this example of change for future research on gender in sport organizations.